International Journal of Interpreter Education

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 14

2010

The Master's Degree in French/French Sign Language Interpreting at ESIT

Philippe Séro-Guillaume
Sorbonne Nouvelle, ph.sero-guillaume@wanadoo.fr

The Master's Degree in French/French Sign Language Interpreting at ESIT

Philippe Séro-Guillaume[1]

École Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs, Université Paris III –Sorbonne Nouvelle

Abstract

This paper presents the master's degree in French/French Sign Language Interpreting at École Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (ESIT) at Université Paris III–Sorbonne Nouvelle. First, it describes the situation of deaf people, sign language, and spoken language interpreting practice and training in France. Second, the paper explains the specifics of the ESIT master's degree.

Keywords: French Sign Language (LSF); spoken language; LSF interpreting; pedagogy; theory

[1] ***Correspondence to***: *ph.sero-guillaume@wanadoo.fr*

Master in French/LSF Interpreting

1. Introduction

In France, although deaf people have always communicated among themselves in sign language, this mode of communication was not considered to be a language, and the few people who acted as interpreters did not receive any training. Since the end of the 19th century, the use of signed language was prohibited in the French educational institutions for deaf people. In 1975, its use was authorized again, but it was not until the 1990s that parents were given the option of having their deaf children integrated into regular educational institutions. Naturally, this decision gave rise to a huge need for competent interpreters and, therefore, to setting up specific interpreter training programs.

Institutions of higher education in Europe, and particularly in France, had been training conference interpreters since the 1950s, but there were no courses for the training of signed language interpreters. Danica Seleskovitch was the first interpreter to recognize that signed language was a language just as any spoken language and that, as Tweney and Hoemann (1976) noted, "there is no reason to expect translation involving sign languages to be radically different from translation involving spoken languages" (p. 149–50). She encouraged two sign language interpreters to study at École Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (ESIT) at Université Paris–Sorbonne Nouvelle for a master's degree in translation studies. In 1993, with the help of Seleskovitch, these two sign language interpreters, having been trained in the theory of interpreting, established a course of French/French Sign Language (Langue de Signes Francaise/ LSF) interpreting at ESIT, adopting the model of the tried and tested curriculum of the conference interpreting department.

2. The customers of LSF interpreters

It is known that a first language is acquired and developed through immersion. Immersion in the spoken language, however, is quite limited for deaf children who, contrary to the natural language learning process of hearing children, learn the spoken language only when it is specifically taught to them. This artificial access to spoken language means that only a minority of deaf people are able to read and write French fluently. Few of them master the spoken language sufficiently to be able to communicate well in French, be it only in writing. In their dealings with administrators or lawyers, for instance, most of them need the mediation of a sign language interpreter. Until the end of the 1970s, the largest part of the work of sign language interpreters was made up by this type of dialogue interpreting.

Since then, France has witnessed a considerable development in sign language interpreting (Séro-Guillaume, 1994, 2006, 2008). Deaf people became aware that they were a linguistic community; they actively fought for the recognition of sign language as a legitimate language and demanded that their specific interpreting needs be met. A number of legal dispositions were passed that allowed deaf children to attend local schools alongside of their hearing peers; the right to bilingualism (French/ LSF), including in regular school settings, was recognized. Since 2006, compensation has been granted to handicapped people to cover interpreting costs; consequently, the demand for interpreters has increased.

Interpreting is vital for deaf people, whether it takes place between a social service representative and an illiterate deaf person who does not know what he/she is entitled to, between an administrator and deaf activists who defend their cause, or in a science classroom.

Interpreting is not only essential for deaf people who do not master French well, but also for those who do; it is extremely tiring to lip-read continuously during a class (or a meeting or conference). Olivier Delanghe (1997) testifies to this from personal experience. Before the time when interpreters were available, he was being educated in an institution for hearing children; a few deaf/hard-of-hearing children also attended the school. During classes, he never understood the whole of the information given by the teacher; he could not answer

Séro-Guillaume

questions because he had understood only part of what he had heard. The first time he had an interpreter, he was extraordinarily relieved because he was, at last, able to follow the class without having to make exhausting efforts to understand what the teacher was saying.

The president of the National Federation of French Deaf, Arlette Morel insists that interpreting enables deaf people to better understand the classes they attend and to read books more easily while, at the same time, improving their French (Seleskovitch, 1997). It gives them access to education, information, and culture.

Interpreters today do not only interpret in dialogue settings (e.g., welfare, healthcare), they also work in educational institutions, from primary schools through universities, in general education settings or vocational schools, in all forms of education.[2] They also interpret in courts of law and during conferences. (Deaf people particularly like to attend conferences dealing with linguistic, cognitive, social, or cultural aspects of deafness.) Moreover, television now regularly employs interpreters when broadcasting the debates in the French National Assembly and various other shows.

Unfortunately, however, not much progress has been made in the teaching of French to deaf people, so that they still have to resort to dialogue interpreting, perhaps even more than before. Today, the work of interpreters is divided into equal parts: educational interpreting and community interpreting for various agencies that deal with deaf people. Conference interpreting represents only about 5% of interpreting, a minute fraction of the whole. And remote interpreting is probably going to develop as a new mode of interpreting.

3. The Master's degree in French/LSF interpreting at ESIT

The aim of ESIT, as part of an institution of higher education, is to produce highly qualified practitioners who have also been familiarized with ESIT's theory of interpreting. The French/LSF interpreting curriculum follows the established curriculum of the conference interpreting training course. It is a two-year graduate level program. Incoming students must have completed three years at the university. They are admitted after a screening procedure that ascertains their language skills (languages are not taught at ESIT), their educational background, and the maturity that is required of highly qualified interpreters.

3.1 A course integrated into a spoken language interpreting program

The program in French/LSF interpreting at ESIT is the only program in France that is fully integrated into a conference interpreting program for spoken languages. This contrasts with other sign language interpreting training courses, which are typically part of linguistics departments, and in which sign language is taught, rather than actual interpreting. In those departments, interpreting is usually considered to be a contact between two languages. In this strictly linguistic perspective, trainees attempt to find correspondents for each of the words or signs of the source language. This tendency toward transliteration (see the difference between "free" and "literal" interpretation in Napier, 2005, p. 86–7) is particularly apparent when interpreters deal with fields yet untouched by signed language. They then ask "How do you say this in sign language?" instead of asking themselves, "What is it really about?" As noted by Seleskovitch and Lederer (1995, p. 25): "We naturally and unconsciously deverbalize what we hear when we communicate in a common language. But dealing with two languages at the same time has a way of impeding the process." A similar comment is made by Humphrey (1997):

[2] Contrary to what could be expected, it is not easier, far from it, to interpret for young children or for little-educated adults than in conferences or university lectures. The more advanced the classes, the easier the task of interpreting becomes for professional, well-trained interpreters; university students have a better mastery of their subject, are more used to being in class, have a stronger foundation in French, and have a greater tolerance for occasional transliteration. They may even request signed French whenever they feel the need to familiarize themselves with French set expressions and idioms (see Napier 2005, p. 87)

> When we look at English and ASL, we see two languages using very different, yet equally effective, devices to convey meaning. ASL/English interpreters must identify source language meaning and make a complete linguistic shift to express the information in the target language. Failure to drop form results in skewed or unclear communication due to the intrusion of source language elements in target language output. (p. 517)

3.2 A pedagogy with a theoretical foundation

The (spoken language) conference interpreters graduating from ESIT in the last fifty years received, and still, receive training that is based on proven pedagogical practices and a sound theoretical framework that has been designed by Danica Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer (1995): the Interpretive Theory of Translation. Interpreting is taught by practicing interpreters with a master's degree in interpreting. In their teaching, all tutors apply the same theoretical principles; this is also the case for the tutors in the LSF interpreting program.

Two classes are common to all first year ESIT students (i.e., conference interpreters, translators, and sign language interpreters): Theory of Translation and Methodology for the Acquisition of Thematic Knowledge. The second class aims to provide students with a foundation for preparing for their future assignments, since "[w]henever an interpreter is working between two languages, it is essential that they have an understanding of the subject matter" (Harrington, 2000, p. 79).

3.3 Starting with consecutive

An additional point of interest is that, just as it is the case for interpreting students in spoken languages, teaching does not start with simultaneous interpreting. True, consecutive interpreting is seldom used in the practice of sign language interpreters, mainly because speaker and interpreter each express themselves in a different code without the signals interfering, contrary to spoken languages. Nevertheless, it was felt that this kind of progression in the program should be applied to LSF interpreter trainees. In consecutive interpreting, it is easier than in simultaneous interpreting to show the students how to analyze and understand a message because the listening and reformulation stages are separate. Debra Russell (2005) notes that:

> Bruto (1985), Lambert (1984), Seleskovitch and Lederer (1995) emphasize that through a progression of exercises aimed at teaching interpreters to grasp, analyze, remember, and only then reproduce the message of the speaker, it is subsequently possible to proceed to acceptable simultaneous interpretation where required or desired. (p. 147)

The first year of the program is, therefore, devoted to consecutive interpreting, first without notes, then with note taking. Students focus on making sense of the speech, taking context and text coherence into account, and trying to express spontaneously what they have understood. The second and final year is spent with the focus on simultaneous interpreting, while continuing to practice consecutive interpreting and internalizing the methodology. At the speed of an extemporaneous spoken or signed speech, "ideas *can* be understood and re-stated, whereas trying to render the actual verbal content alone would take too long and result in a spotty, incoherent interpretation" (Seleskovitch and Lederer, 1995, p. 130).

3.4 Progression of teaching

Once the method is well established, the complexity of topics is increased, as well as trainers' requirements in terms of clarity, coherence, and completeness of the final product. The goal is that the method should become automatic, so that interpreters can concentrate on building sense and reformulating it in an idiomatic target language, whether signed or spoken.

As in the spoken languages program, ethics is dealt with in the various classes, as are ways to deal with rhetoric and lexical problems in fields yet unexplored in LSF. Students are also introduced to new technologies and, in particular, to remote interpreting.

3.5. Sign language interpreting students work both ways

One difference with the spoken language curriculum is that, whereas spoken language interpreters in Europe are required to have three, or even four, languages and they are mainly taught to interpret into their mother tongue, their sign language peers are bilingual and have to interpret both ways. However, in actual practice, interpreters work mainly by interpreting *into* sign language. What Ingram (1978) wrote is still true in 2010: "Interpreters, even those for whom sign language is their first language, consider interpretation from a sign language to be a more difficult task than interpretation into a sign language" (p. 115). Since they do it less often, they have less practice with it and their renditions into the spoken language are not always quite up to par. A poor quality of interpretation into French is of course detrimental to the image given by deaf people when they express themselves. Consequently, at ESIT, the same number of classes is devoted to interpreting into French as interpreting into LSF.

4. The triadic interaction and the interpreters' role

Today the role of signed language and community interpreters is abundantly discussed in the literature (Angelelli, 2004; Hale, 2007; Roy, 2002; Wadensjö, 1998), as compared with the beginnings of research in interpreting, in which the focus was on the process of interpreting. This focus on the role may be due to the fact that research is applied to a majority of poorly qualified interpreters, or even untrained persons occasionally acting as interpreters, who have not been given the opportunity to reflect on their role. ESIT students are constantly reminded of the importance of paying attention to the context and the users of the interpretation. Clearly, the linguistic and cognitive dimensions are only two of the components of interpreting. Interpreters must also be able to adapt to different populations, from the asocial illiterate deaf person who is practically without any language to university students and be able to adapt to the most varied settings (including healthcare setting, courtroom situations, and symposiums that deal with, for instance, the notion of conceptualization in deaf children). This can and should be discussed in class. Adapting to one's interlocutors is a basic characteristic of language.

> Intelligibility, which is the goal of the spoken [and signed] language, is not merely expressed by a greater or lesser degree of explicitness—it takes other forms as well. One speaks louder to a deaf person and gestures to a person who is too far away to hear; in short, one uses the language that the other person can understand. (Seleskovitch, 1978, p. 18)

Discussing the role of interpreters in a conference setting, Seleskovitch (1978) observes:

> Although their role is different from that of the delegates at a meeting, interpreters participate in it just as actively as they do. An international conference is thus a "*trilogue*," in which interpreters seek neither to emphasize their presence nor to play it down but simply to play their role. They realize how much they contribute to the smooth running of the conference and know where to draw the line between saying enough to do their job properly and establish communication between delegates, and saying anything that would run counter to their role or over-involve them in the dialogue to the point that they would color the message with their own ideas. (p. 98)

The aim of interpreters is to transmit the message with absolute fidelity, that is, to make it understood by the recipients of their interpretation as it was understood by those who listened directly to the speaker or by people who looked directly at the person signing.

> Very little explanation is needed, for instance, when interpreting for officials of an international organization in their everyday work. . . .On the other hand, with delegates who come from very different cultures and who speak very different languages, interpreters must sometimes be more explicit, concentrate on something that might otherwise have been misunderstood, or explain something that was only alluded to. In no way, however, should this be taken to mean that they say anything different from the speaker because, as a party to the "trilogue," they always refrain from assuming a delegate's role. (Seleskovitch, 1978, p. 100)

5. Conclusion

The notions of "trilogue" and of the "interpreters' role" are applicable to French/LSF interpreting. The role of interpreters will obviously be different whether they interpret in a university graduate program, in a primary school, or in a social service agency for a deaf person who doesn't know French well. But interpreting is interpreting, whether it is at a conference or in the community, and whether it takes place between interlocutors of a similar culture and social status or the interlocutors are separated by an important cultural and educational gap (see Mikkelson, 1999). Its nature doesn't change. However, the personal role of interpreters in the transmission of the message, a key element in interpreting, will vary according to the circumstances and settings. The staff at the French/LSF interpreting program at ESIT teaches this to the interpreters they train, in addition to teaching the correct interpreting methodology.

6. References

Angelelli, C. (2004). *Medical interpreting and cross-cultural communication*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Delanghe, O. (1997). La place de l'interprétation dans l'itinéraire scolaire, professionnel et universitaire d'un sourd. *Meta*, 42(3), Numéro spécial : L'interprétation en langues des signes, 555-559.

Hale, S. B. (2007). *Community interpreting.* New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Harrington, F. J. (2000). Deaf students and the interpreted classroom. In F. J. Harrington and G. H. Turner (Eds.), *Interpreting Interpreting*: *Studies and reflections on sign language interpreting* (pp. 74–88). Coleford, UK: Douglas McLean.

Humphrey, J. H. (1997). Chopping down and reconstructing a tree. *Meta, 42*(3), Numéro spécial: L'interprétation en langues des signes, 515–529.

Ingram, R. M.(1978). Sign language interpretation and general theories of language, interpretation and communication. In D. Gerver and H. W. Sinaiko (Eds.), *Language Interpretation and Communication* (pp.109-118). New York and London: Plenum Press.

Lederer, M. (2003*). Translation – the interpretive model.* (N. Larché, Trans.). Manchester, UK : St. Jerome. (Original work, *La traduction aujourd'hui – le modèle interprétatif*, published 1994 revised edition 2006).

Mikkelson, H. (1999). Interpreting is interpreting—or is it? Available at: http://www.acebo.com/papers/interp1.htm. (Accessed 31 August 2009).

Napier, J. (2005). Linguistic features and strategies of interpreting: From research to education to practice. In M. Marschark, R. Peterson, and E. A. Winston (Eds.), *Sign language interpreting and interpreter education* (pp. 84–111). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Roy, C. (2000). *Interpreting as a discourse process*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Séro-Guillaume

Russell, D. (2005). Consecutive and simultaneous interpreting. In T. Janzen (Ed.), *Topics in signed language interpreting* (pp. 135–164). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Seleskovitch, D. (1978). *Interpreting for international conferences: Problems of language and communication (3rd ed.)*. (S. Dailey & E.N. McMillan, Trans.). Washington, DC: Pen & Booth. (Original work, *L'interprète dans les conférences internationales : Problèmes de langage et de communication,* published 1968*)*.

Seleskovitch, D. & Lederer, M. (1995). *A systematic approach to teaching interpretation*. (J. Harmer, Trans.). Washington, DC: The Registry of Interpreters for Deaf, (Original work, *Pédagogie raisonnée de l'interprétation*, published 1989).

Seleskovitch, D. (1997). Interview de Mme Arlette Morel, présidente de la Fédération Nationale des Sourds de France. *Meta*, 42(3), Numéro spécial : L'interprétation en langues des signes, 560-563.

Séro-Guillaume, P. (1994). *L'interprétation en langue des signes*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation: Université Paris III–Sorbonne Nouvelle.

Séro-Guillaume, P. (2006*)*. La scénarisation du sens en langue des signes et en interprétation—la langue des signes, genèse et description succinctes. In M. Lederer (Ed.), *Le sens en traduction* (pp. 277–284). Caen, France : Minard Lettres Modernes.

Séro-Guillaume, P. (2008). *Langue des signes, surdité, et accès au langage*. Paris, France: Editions du papyrus.

Tweney, R. and Hoemann, H. (1976). Translation and sign language. In R. Brislin (Ed.), *Translation—applications and research* (pp. 138–162). New York, NY: Garner Press.

Wadensjö, C. (1998). *Interpreting as interaction*. London, UK: Longman.